

# WOODEN SPOIL

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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## "YOU WAN' TO FIGHT, EH? ALL RIGHT!"

Synopsis.—Hilary Askew, young American, comes into possession of the timber and other rights on a considerable section of wooded land in Quebec—the Rosny seigniory. Lamartine, his uncle's lawyer, tells him the property is of little value. He visits it, and finds Morris, the manager, away. From Lafe Connell, mill foreman, Askew learns his uncle has been systematically robbed. He sees Madeleine Rosny, the seigneur's beautiful daughter. Askew and Connell reach an understanding, and Askew realizes the extent of the fraud practiced on his uncle. Askew learns that Morris, while manager of his (Askew's) property, is associated with the Ste. Marie company, a rival concern, of which Edouard Brousseau is the owner. Hilary discharges Morris.

### CHAPTER III.—Continued.

"Ah, yes, Monsieur Askew. But, you see, Mr. Morris he pay the men their wages."

"Call them here," said Hilary.

Jean-Marie called, and the men came forward. "Now tell them what I have told you," Hilary continued.

Jean-Marie's translation was met with a volley of interjections. The little timekeeper began half a dozen explanations and finally gave up in despair.

"They say it's Monsieur Brousseau's orders," he explained. "You see, monsieur, we know now that the property is yours, but Monsieur Brousseau hires the mill hands."

"Tell them in future I shall hire the mill hands. Tell them it is my mill." This was met with blank incredulity. Evidently Brousseau's lease of mill rights had passed for ownership.

"Anyway, say that their jobs are good for the coming year," announced Hilary, and wondered whether he feared hope to make good on that statement. "Where's Lafe Connell?" he asked.

"Lafe, he is discharged, too," answered Jean-Marie. "He go right away

thought you was going to fire Morris, and he comes out and fires me and orders me off the concession. That's a grand way to start standing by your word, Mr. Askew."

"I have fired him."

"What?" yelled Lafe, spinning round.

"I fired him after we'd had a talk, Lafe. And I guess he put on a front in order to get rid of you, because you know too much, hoping that it would mean nothing to me. But it does, Lafe. Tell me what made you make that crazy dash for the steamer."

"Because I'm sick to death of this damned country," answered Lafe. "Because I can't stand the people, or the climate, or Father Lucy praying out fires, or the verandas. I'm sick of it, Mr. Askew, and Clarice and the kids is in Shoburport. That's why, I guess," he said, raising his head and looking at Hilary plaintively. "I guess my feelings kind of got the better of me."

Hilary thumped him on the shoulder. "That's all right, Lafe," he said, "but you're going to sign on with me for a year from October first—just one year more. And you're going to sign as manager, at Morris' salary."

Lafe Connell looked at him as if it was all a dream. Lafe had been working at forty-five dollars a week since his arrival.

"Mr. Askew," he said, when he could steady his voice, "I guess I've been ungrateful. But when Morris told me I was discharged I naturally concluded that he'd bought you out. I'll stay, Mr. Askew, and I'll do all I can to help clean up this mess and put things on a paying foundation. I guess everyone's been cheating your uncle, Mr. Askew, from Morris and Brousseau and Leblanc down to Jean-Baptiste the scaler. I knew they were swindling you, and Brousseau telephoned me to keep you in the dark, and I tried to do it."

"Never mind, Lafe. You and I will go over the books together and clean up."

"And I tell you this," went on Lafe. "Give fellows like Baptiste—Baptiste and me—an example of honest work, and you'll see they'll follow you and take a pride in the business. It's the big fellows we want to get."

Hilary held out his hand. "We'll shake on that," he said. "You accept the post, Lafe, and you won't make a break for home again?"

"Never again, so long as we're on the job together," Lafe answered.

Far off the steamship was pursuing her way toward Quebec. Hilary, watching her, was conscious of a zest of living which his conversion of Lafe did not wholly explain. What, he wondered, was the secret of his interest in St. Boniface?

### CHAPTER IV.

#### The First Encounter.

Next morning Hilary drove slowly through his property. He noticed with approval a splendid growth of white spruce. It was a great timber country; Hilary had already come to that conclusion, and to this: that, properly worked and managed, the St. Boniface tract had the possibilities of considerable profits, perpetual ones, if he cut wisely and carefully.

After driving at a slow pace for half an hour he emerged into a little burned-over district, from which he could see for a good distance on every side of him. He stopped the pony and looked about him, trying to get his bearings.

The road must run down to the gorge, where was the main way between the mill and the interior of the seigniory, Hilary decided.

He drove on again. The track had been disused that season and was overgrown with creeping raspberry briars, which made progress difficult. Suddenly the undergrowth fell away, and the road ran upward again, hard and firm, toward a bridge that spanned a wide creek tributary to Rocky river.

Now Hilary knew where he was. It was the creek which he had passed that morning when he drove out with Connell to inspect the seigniory.

He was about to continue his way along the main road to the mill, but an impulse urged him to turn the horse about and seek the road that led to Leblanc's old concession. Presently he heard the sound of axes among the trees. He came upon the clearing, to find the old camp still standing, and a great pile of newly hewn timber stacked up under the trees.

At Hilary's appearance two or three men looked up from the logs which they were sawing and whispered. They seemed to draw together. At that mo-

ment Hilary had a clearly defined impression of approaching trouble.

He got down from the buggy and fastened the horse to a tree. He approached a little group that had formed. "Where's Monsieur Leblanc?" he asked the nearest man.

The man scowled and shrugged his shoulders. He glanced toward the camp. Hilary, looking that way, saw Black Pierre emerging from one of the huts. He went toward him, and the two men met face to face.

Still without reason to believe in Pierre's hostile intention, Hilary suddenly became aware that they were ringed by a circle of men, who gradually drew in toward them.

"Morning," said Hilary, nodding. "Where is Monsieur Leblanc?" "I don't know," answered Pierre, scowling. "Look for him if you want him. He's your man, ain't he?"

"He is, but you are not. What are you doing on my land? And these men—are they yours?"

"What you mean, your land?" demanded Pierre. "I work here for Monsieur Brousseau, with Monsieur Brousseau's men."

Hilary saw, out of the corner of his eye, that the ring was swiftly contracting. It struck him that Pierre and he were posted face to face, like prize-fighters. He tried to keep his temper and to remember Connell's counsel. Pierre thought he was afraid. He sneered openly.

"Last time I came here," said Hilary calmly, disregarding the other's truculence, "Monsieur Leblanc was in charge of this territory. Now I find you here in Leblanc's place. I have not hired you. Again I ask what you are doing here."

"I don't know what you mean," snorted Pierre. "An' I got no time to waste in damn foolishness. This here is the Ste. Marie limits. Monsieur Brousseau an' Monsieur Morris run the Ste. Marie limits. Leblanc he work for them last year. Now I got Leblanc's place."

"The Ste. Marie limits are on the other side of the Riviere Rocheuse," said Hilary.

"Holy Name, ain't I this side of Riviere Rocheuse? Didn't you cross him coming here?"

"That creek is not the Riviere Rocheuse, as you know very well, Pierre."

Black Pierre thrust his face forward into Hilary's. "Say, I got no time to waste wit' you," he snarled. "If you come to fight, say so."

"I'll give you five minutes to get off my land."

"You wan' to fight, eh? All right," growled the other, suddenly stripping off his short, open jacket.

Hilary had just time to fasten the top button of his coat before Pierre, with a bellow, charged him, his head down, his arms working like flails. Pierre made short, vicious stabs at him; he was muscle-bound and could not extend the elbow-joint with any force, but any of his short blows, delivered from a shoulder like a mutton joint, would have knocked a man senseless.

Hilary stepped aside as Pierre precipitated himself upon him, and gave him a short uppercut with the left. Pierre went reeling past him, tripped over a projecting trunk of a tree, and fell sprawling to the ground.

A second later he was up again, rushing at Hilary. Despite Hilary's blows, which nearly blinded him, and covered his face with blood, he managed to get



He Rose, Spitting the Blood Out of His Mouth, and Rushed at Hilary Again.

home two body deliveries which knocked the wind out of the American. Hilary was forced to give ground. He had boxed at college a good deal; that was several years before, but the memory instinctively came back to him. "It's foot-work wins," his teacher had told him. He stepped from side to side, guarding himself against Pierre's furious lunges dexterously, until the opportunity for a telling cross-counter with the right sent Pierre crashing backward.

He rose, spitting the blood out of his mouth, and rushed at Hilary again. This time he managed to lock his arms about him and, holding him securely with the left, pummeled him. Hilary forgot his science and shot his right upward between the arm and the body, landing on Pierre's chin. Pierre reeled, but he did not let go his hold. He grasped Hilary like a bear, hugging him till the breath was nearly out of his body, and forcing the point of his chin in under Hilary's collar-bone.

Pierre was several years the older, and winded by fast living, but his muscles were as firm as a young man's. Knowing that his enemy's science was more than a match for his superior strength, he maintained the clinch, but gradually shifted his grasp upward, first pinning Hilary's arm, then gripping his shoulder, until he had him by the throat.

Hilary, gasping under the relentless pressure, saw the faces of the lumbermen swim round him. He saw the triumph and the joy, the mockery and the hatred on each; there was no pity for the American; many an old land question, many a racial conflict had become incarnate in that fight under the pines. Hilary realized that it was a battle, not for the timber tract, but for his own life.

Pierre's face grinned into his own malignantly, plastered with dust and smeared with the sweat that drove white furrows across it. Hilary let his hands fall limply. For just a second Pierre relaxed his grasp, to shift it so the thumb-knuckles should close on the carotids. Then Hilary put all his strength into a terrific drive with the left. The blow caught Pierre between the eyes, his arms went up, releasing Hilary, and he tottered backward. The yells of the lumbermen, which had been continuous, suddenly ceased.

Before Pierre could recover himself Hilary let him have it with the right. Pierre went to the ground. Hilary still only half conscious, and hardly seeing the prostrate body, drew in a deep chestful of air. A black cloud filled with dancing specks swam before his vision. Out of it he saw the face of one of the nearest spectators. It was filled with an anticipation so pungent that instinctively Hilary leaped aside. Out of the cloud he saw Black Pierre plunge forward, knife in his hand. The spent blow cut Hilary's sleeve. Pierre recovered himself and rushed at the American, a fearful spectacle, dripping sweat and blood. Hilary caught him with the right under the jaw, sending him flat. The knife went whirling away into the underbrush. Black Pierre lay still.

Hilary turned to the nearest of the awed lumbermen. "Bring him a cup of water," he ordered.

The man understood and ran into Pierre's hut. But Pierre was shamming; he opened his eyes, fixed them with burning hate on Hilary, and mumbled.

"Get up!" said Hilary.

Pierre rose sullenly, edging out of the reach of the expected blow. He was cowed, the fighting spirit was out of him, as it was out of his companions. As civilized men fear the law, the lumbermen feared the unknown forces that lay behind Hilary and manifested themselves through the strength of his arm.

"I'll give you five minutes to get off the St. Boniface territory into the Ste. Marie limits, the other side of Rocky river," Hilary said. He turned to the spectators. "I'll thrash every man not employed by me who comes upon my land," he announced.

Whether they understood the meaning of the words or not, they realized the significance of the gesture. Black Pierre, among his companions at the edge of the clearing, stopped his retreat. He meant at least to save his face by threats. But Hilary had deliberately turned his back on him and, without apparent fear of danger, was examining the shacks, and poking the moss out of the interstices between the logs with a forked stick. When he turned the last of the Ste. Marie men was disappearing out of the clearing down the road. He waited long enough for them to reach the fork, before re-entering the buggy.

He was thoughtful on the drive homeward. He knew that it was only the unexpected nature of his action which had cleared the concession. That had been a paramount duty; at any cost he must preserve the integrity of his land. But, given Brousseau's leadership and active hostility, they could put up a fight which would render him impotent. Physical force could bring him nowhere in the end.

It took about an hour for the embellished story to filter through to the mill. Before work was knocked off that afternoon Hilary became conscious of a new deference in his hands' manner, of gaping looks that followed him when he went from office to mill, or back. For the first time St. Boniface began to believe that the Morris regime had really passed.

"We've still got Brousseau, though," said Hilary to Lafe. "When do you suppose he's going to declare himself?"

"Soon," said Lafe. "You've seen to that, Mr. Askew."

"Well," answered Hilary cheerfully, "we'll meet that trouble when it comes. Meanwhile, don't spare the teams in breaking up those piles and sending them through the mill. I've got to get out a record load next month, and I'm going to credit all the wood that goes through the mill to the St. Boniface tract and let Brousseau take any action he likes about it."

Brousseau was not long in declaring war. On the following afternoon, as he sat in his office, Hilary, looking through the window, saw Madeleine Rosny driving a rig along the road toward the mill. Beside her sat a man whom he had never seen before. He surmised at once that it was Brousseau, but he hardly expected that the girl was bringing him to the office.

Such proved to be the case. The rig stopped at the door and Hilary had a glimpse of Madeleine's averted, scornful face as she sat waiting, as if Hilary were beneath her pride, as if to stop there was no more than to stop at any laborer's shack. Her companion leaped out and came briskly to the door.

He was a man of something more than forty, but active and young-looking. He came into the office and glared down at Hilary, who at once rose and faced him.

"I'm Mr. Brousseau," said the visitor.

"I've heard of you," said Hilary.

"You'll hear more of me. You assaulted one of my men yesterday. Do you think you can come into this country and knock my men about like that for doing their duty?"

"He was on the Rosny seigniory, and cutting my timber."

"He was on the west side of Riviere Rocheuse," snarled Brousseau. "The Riviere Rocheuse has never been surveyed. What you call the creek is the upper part of Riviere Rocheuse. Leblanc had permission to cut that tract for Mr. Morris because our two companies worked hand in hand. It is not my way to make explanations, Monsieur Askew, but take that for what it is worth."

"I do so, and it is worth nothing," Hilary answered. "What is your proposition?"

"You assaulted my man." "Never mind your man. He started it, and he needed it. If I find him on my limits I'll assault him again. You haven't come here to complain about that, Monsieur Brousseau. What have you come for?"

Brousseau advanced and banged his fist on the desk. "I've come here to tell you that you're a fool, young man," he answered. "My word goes in this part of the country, and you can't come in here and fight me."

"Your proposal, please," said Hilary quietly.

"Now you're talking sense. This ain't the United States, where you rich men can come into a territory and grab it away from the people under their noses. You'll put Mr. Morris back as manager and go home, or else you'll sell out to me."

"Yes, it does come to about the same thing," said Hilary. "Why don't you ask me to make you a free gift of the concession?"

Brousseau scowled savagely at the sarcasm. He was educated enough to be stung by banter, but not quick enough to retaliate in kind.

"Now I'll make you my own proposition," said Hilary. "It's this. You can either submit your books to my inspection and make good on that lumber that Morris stole from me last year, and keep your men on your own limits, or you can give up the mill rights after October first and build your own mill."

Brousseau turned white with rage. "I'll run you out of this country," he raved. "I'll freeze you out before the winter's over, Monsieur Askew. You watch me!"

"Maybe," said Hilary. "Meanwhile, I think you're keeping the buggy waiting, and there is no use in prolonging this conversation unless you want to accept my terms."

Brousseau shook with wrath; he opened his mouth to speak, but snorted instead; he shook his fist furiously and, turning upon his heel, stamped out of the office. From his desk Hilary watched him climb into the buggy and drive away. His head was bent toward Madeleine Rosny's, and he was talking emphatically and gesticulating freely.

"War's declared," said Hilary to himself, with relief, as he settled himself in his chair.

Hilary talked the matter over with Lafe later in the day. "If we can get a good shipment out before the Gulf closes," he said, "we can carry on till spring. But of course we can't haul lumber out of the woods until there's several feet of snow on the ground."

"And that won't be till navigation's ended for the year," said Lafe. "So I'm going to put through the mill every cord of lumber in the river," continued Hilary. "We'll keep Dupont busy. And we'll wind up the year with a substantial balance to our credit."

"The Ste. Marie lumber," mused Lafe.

"I guess they call it so. But I believe it's all ours. We've got the whip hand of Brousseau there, because it's our mill, and Dupont's independent of Brousseau. Brousseau can't stop me using that lumber, and he daresn't go to law about it."

Lafe approved the scheme, with warnings to Hilary about going slow. They went up to the dam and looked over the logs in the river. Riviere Rocheuse was packed as far as the eye could reach. The sight raised Hilary's spirits. There must be thousands of dollars' worth of lumber in between the high banks, ready to be passed through the roasting mill for Dupont's schooner.

Lafe came to him next day. "The logs in the dam are going into the mill all right," he said, "but they

ain't coming down-stream above St. Baptiste says there's a jam in the gorge."

They got the rig and drove to the spot. At the gorge was a solid wall of logs, packed like the straw coverings of wine-bottles. The starting of the logs had wedged them together here. It was clear that it would be necessary to start the mass with dynamite.

"I guess that's the trick," said Lafe. "Baptiste here is an expert dynamiter."

"Yes, that shift him quick," said Jean-Marie. "Mighty quick, maybe. I think, Mr. Askew, it is better first to make stronger your boom, or else your lumber go over the rapids into the Gulf."

"How long will it take?" asked Hilary.

"A week, maybe, for good work. That boom, he will never stand so many logs as that, Mr. Askew."

"Get a gang to work at daybreak tomorrow," Hilary instructed him.

That night Hilary congratulated himself on having started his counter-offensive against Brousseau. In spite of



Brousseau Scowled Savagely at the Sarcasm.

the man's influence in the district, he felt assured of the loyalty of the bulk of his men. Lafe was worth a hundred and little Baptiste knew his job perfectly. He went to bed in high spirits.

The next morning Brousseau struck his first blow. Hilary had just ordered the rig in order to drive over to Leblanc's lease and try to stop the operations about the Chateau when Leblanc appeared in the office, accompanied by four ruffians whom Hilary recognized as the subjobbers.

"Well, Leblanc?" asked Hilary.

"What's this I hear you make complaint about my work?" Leblanc demanded.

"You've been cutting round the Chateau, Leblanc, and you'll have to stop it," said Hilary. "You knew you were not supposed to cut there."

"Ain't I got right to cut on my own lease?" demanded the jobber truculently.

"Maybe you have, but anyway you aren't going to cut round the Chateau."

"You think so?" asked Leblanc insolently. "All right. You find another boss jobber. Maybe you find one in September what couldn't get a job for next winter, you are so clever. I don't know. For me, I go to work for Monsieur Morris at Ste. Marie."

"So that's your game, Leblanc! How about that contract?"

"That's all right. But if I don't pay on January first, the contract is no good. That was your words, which you wrote down. Well, I keep the lease if you like, Monsieur Askew, an' I cut where I like, or I don't pay one cent. An' these men say they go wherever I go. They won't work for you if I go, because you thrash Black Pierre. They ain't dogs, they're men, an' they got families. They don't stand for no beating with fists. Maybe you change your mind about the cutting?"

"Go to the devil!" shouted Hilary.

"Maybe you like to beat these men now, eh?" sneered Leblanc. "No? All right. You find other boss jobber Monsieur Askew."

He clapped on his hat, and, as if they had rehearsed the scene, the four ruffians followed Leblanc in solemn and triumphant parade across the floor and out of the office.

This was first blood with a vengeance. Leblanc's lease was a necessity; it meant money, and money just when his capital would be exhausted. It was essential to sub-lease the tract to some one else. But there was no one in St. Boniface capable of assuming charge of such a contract. The habitants had no heads for business and no money to invest. All that was paid out in wages flowed back to the store, owned by the Ste. Marie company, and to the Ste. Marie saloons. Ste. Marie was bleeding St. Boniface white in every way.

Filled with resentment, Hilary countermanded the order for the rig and walked up by the mill. His nerves were raw and quivering as he reached the end of the strip of land where Rocky river pours into the Gulf below. The whistle blew, and he turned toward St. Boniface and stopped, watching the mob of men emerging from the mill.

"Why do you come here?" she cried.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

One strong point of many a woman is at the end of a hat pin.